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THE ORATION

DELIVERED, JULY 2, 1863

AT THE

DEDICATION OF THE MONUMENT
COMMEMORATIVE OF THE MEN OF NEW
YORK WHO FELL AT GETTYSBURG

JULY 2, 1863

BY

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ORATION

BY

RIGHT REV. HENRY C. POTTER.

[DELIVERED AT GETTYSBURG JULY 2, 1893.]

THIRTY years ago to-day, these peaceful scenes were echoing with the roar and din of what a calm and unimpassioned historian, writing of it long years afterwards, described as the "greatest battlefield of the New World." Thirty years ago to-day the hearts of some thirty millions of people turned to this spot with various but eager emotions, and watched here the crash of two armies which gathered in their vast embrace the flower of a great people. Never, declared the seasoned soldiers who listened to the roar of the enemy's artillery, had they heard anything that was comparable with it.¹ Now and then it paused, as though the very throats of the mighty guns were tired,—but only for a little. Not for one day, nor for two, but for three raged the awful conflict, while the Republic gave its best life to redeem its honor, and the stain of all previous blundering and

¹ *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, Nicolay and Hay, vol. vii., page 241.

faltering was washed white forever with the blood of its patriots and martyrs.

How far away it all seems, as we stand here to-day ! How profound the contrast between those hours and days of bloodshed, and the still serenity of nature as it greets us now ! The graves that cluster round us here—the peaceful resting-places of a nation's heroes—are green and fair ; and, within them, they who fell here, after life's fierce and fitful fever, are sleeping well.

And we are here to tell the world, to-day, that we have not forgotten them. It seems a tardy honor that we come to pay them, but through all the years that have come and gone we have kept their memories green. No single anniversary of their great achievement has returned that they who count its chiefest honor that they may call these men brothers have not come here to bring their grateful homage, and to recite the splendid story of their splendid deeds. Nay, more—in far-off towns and hamlets, north, and east, and west, in every home from which they came, no year has passed that ardent voices have not sung their valor and iron pens traced upon imperishable pages the story of their sacrifices. It is a long day, indeed, from that in the year of our Lord, 1863, to this in 1893 ; but if we seem to be late in raising here this monument, you who behold it to-day will own that it is not unworthy of the men and the deeds that it commemorates.

I may not rehearse the story of those deeds, this afternoon. Already they have become a part of our common heritage and have passed by a process of spiritual assimilation into the very fibre of the nation's life. There is no school-boy now who has not read the peerless and incomparable story—read it, and flushed and glowed with the fire of a passionate patriotism while he read it,—all the way along from that first moment when long before the dawn of July 1st “Meade himself,” as the historian has described him¹ “came upon the field at 1 o'clock in the morning, a pale, tired-looking, hollow-eyed man, worn with toil and lack of sleep, with little of the conventional hero about him, but stout in heart and clear in mind,”—on through that early morning when the heroic Reynolds, grasping the situation with a great commander's swift intuition, dashed along the Emmitsburg road to seize, if he might, the great opportunity that confronted him, and a little later was shot dead by a bullet through the brain,—on through that bloody morning and afternoon, when Hancock and Howard came, when Slocum seized and occupied his vantage ground, when our own Sickles, with his dusty and travel-stained veterans, came in haste from Emmitsburg and forced the fighting,—yes, on through all that memorable night that followed, and that knew no rest nor pause of hurrying battalions and tramp of

¹ *Life of Lincoln*, Nicolay and Hay, vol. vii., page 246.

armed men—on, till the morning dawned that ushered in this tremendous and never-to-be-forgotten day,—how well, now, we remember its incomparable story, and with awe and reverence recall it !

For here, friends and countrymen, the world witnessed a battlefield disfigured by no littleness and spoiled by no treachery. So long as the world lasts men will differ about the best strategy in war, and the schoolmen in arms will dispute concerning the wisdom of commanders, and the quality of their generalship. But though the critics may tell us what, in this or that emergency, might or might not have been done here thirty years ago, no criticism, however clever or hostile, can at all belittle that which was the one supreme splendor of this day and this field. Here the world saw a great army confronted with a great crisis and dealing with it in a great way. Here, for a time at any rate, all lesser jealousies and rivalries disappeared in the one supreme rivalry how each one should best serve his country and, if need be, die for her ! Listen to the keynote of those great days as the general commanding himself struck it :

“HEADQUARTERS OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC, June 30, 1863.—The commanding general requests that, previous to the engagement soon expected with the enemy, corps and other commanding officers will address

their troops, explaining to them briefly the immense issues involved in the struggle. The enemy are on our soil; the whole country now looks anxiously to this army to deliver it from the presence of the foe; our failure to do so will leave us no such welcome as the swelling of millions of hearts with pride and joy at our success would give to every soldier of this army. Homes, firesides, domestic altars are involved. The army has fought well heretofore; it is believed that it will fight more desperately and bravely than ever, if it is addressed in fitting terms. . . .

“By command of Major-General Meade.

“S. Williams, Assistant Adj. Gen.”’

Such words were not wasted. Whatever else was wanting, here were not wanting a high purpose, and heroic souls to follow it.

And so as we come here to-day, my countrymen, we come, first of all, to honor that which in human nature is the best—unflinching courage, unfaltering sacrifice, and over all, a patriot’s pure devotion to the right. Let no man say that in raising this monument to our dead heroes we are setting up one more altar wherewith to glorify the cruel god of war. There is, indeed, no one of us here, I am persuaded, who does not see in war and

¹ See Greeley’s *The American Conflict*, vol. ii., page 377.

its attendant train of evils and horrors, that of which any man or nation may wisely be in dread. There is no one of us here, I am no less persuaded, who, listening to that blatant jingoism that, from some safe retreat, from time to time shoots its envenomed fang of swagger and of hate to inflame, if it may, a great people to some silly deed of arms alike unworthy of its power and its enlightenment—there is no one of us, I say, who listening to such foolish talk does not hear it with equal amusement and contempt. But, all the same, we may not forget that there may come in the history of every nation emergencies when all the resources of diplomacy and all the cleverness of statesmanship having been exhausted, there remains no other arbitrament but the sword, no last court of appeal, but to arms. And surely we who have lived, as have many of us here, through that memorable era which preceded the struggle which we are here to-day to commemorate, can never forget that there were ideas which were at war, first of all; and that the life of this Republic was bound up with the triumph of those ideas for which this battlefield must for ever stand—yes, their triumph, peacefully if it might be, but with sword, and shot, and shell, if it must be.

Believe me, my countrymen, we need to remember this! Into this sacred and august presence—the presence both of the dead and of the living,—and amid these gracious

and tender ceremonies, I would not introduce one discordant note. It is well that as the years go by the rancors that once divided children of the same republic should be forgiven and forgotten. But there are other things that may not be forgotten, and it is at our peril that we forget them. We may never forget that the struggle of which these graves are the witnesses was a struggle for the eternal righteousness. We may never forget that the cause which was substantially decided here was the cause of freedom, and justice, and the everlasting equities, as against a despotism, which, however amiable its ordinary exhibitions, had in it, as Sumner said of it, the essence of that "crime that degrades men." We may never forget that, behind the cause of the Union, was the cause of unpaid labor, of bartered manhood, of a traffic which dealt in human hearts. We may never forget that the greatest victory in the war of the Rebellion was the triumph of great principles. And, above all, we may never forget that a nation which has won its freedom from dishonor with a great price, can only maintain that freedom by struggles and sacrifices equally great. These halcyon seas on which we float—O my countrymen, they are not always friendly to a nation's best well-being. The institutions which, at such cost, we have rescued from disintegration and ruin, will not long survive unless you and I are concerned as to those

foundations on which they rest, and unless, above all, we watch with jealous eye whatever alien hand would abuse or pervert them. It was the tragedy of that struggle which we are here to-day to remember, that it was an internecine struggle. They were of ourselves who lifted the flag of revolt and disowned the authority of the government; and it may be—alas only lately we have been reminded how easily!—that those in high places shall even be the apologists of the red flag of anarchy and of the red hands of its ensanguined followers. This day, this service, and most of all these our heroic dead, stand—let us here swear never to forget it—for the sanctity of law, for the enduring supremacy of just and equitable government, and so for the liberties of a law-abiding people!

In their honor we come here, my brothers, to consecrate this monumental shaft. What, now, is that one feature in this occasion which lends to it its supreme and most pathetic interest? There are other monuments in this city of a nation's dead, distinguished as these graves that lie about us here can never be. There are the tombs and memorials of heroes whose names are blazoned upon them, and whose kindred and friends as they have stood round them have repeopled this scene with their vanished forms, have recalled their lineaments, have recited their deeds, and have stood in tender homage around forms

which were once to them a living joy and presence. But for us to-day there is no such privilege, no such tender individuality of grief. These are our unknown dead. Out of whatever homes they came we cannot tell. What were their names, their lineage, their human mien and aspect, of this no less we are ignorant. One thing only we know. They wore our uniform. In one form or another, by cap, or sleeve, or weapon—somewhere upon the scarred and mutilated forms that once lay dying or dead within sight of these historic hills there was the token of that Empire State whence they had come—whence we have come, and that makes them and us, in the bond of that dear and noble commonwealth, forever brothers. And that is enough for us. We need to know no more. From the banks of the Hudson and the St. Lawrence, from the wilds of the Catskills and the Adirondacks, from the salt shores of Long Island, and from the fresh lakes of Geneva and Onondaga and their peers, from the forge and the farm, the shop and the factory, from college halls and crowded tenements, all alike, they came here and fought and fell—and shall never, never be forgotten! Our great unknown defenders. Ah, my countrymen, here we touch the foundations of a people's safety—of a nation's greatness! We are wont to talk much of the world's need of great leaders, and their proverb is often on our lips who said of old, "Woe

unto the land whose king is a child." Yes, verily, that is a dreary outlook for any people when among her sons there is none worthy to lead her armies, to guide her counsels, to interpret her laws, or to administer them. But that is a still drearier outlook when in any nation, however wise her rulers and noble and heroic her commanders, there is no greatness in the people equal to a great vision in an emergency, and with a great courage with which to seize it. And that, I maintain, was the supreme glory of the heroes whom we commemorate to-day. Do you tell me that they were unknown—that they commanded no battalions, determined no policies, sat in no military councils, rode at the head of no regiments? Be it so! All the more are they the fitting representatives of you and me—the people. Never in all history, I venture to affirm, was there a war whose aims, whose policy, whose sacrifices were so absolutely determined by the people, that great body of the unknown, in which, after all, lay the strength and the power of the Republic. When some one reproached Lincoln for the seeming hesitancy of his policy, he answered—great seer as well as great soul that he was—"I stand for the people. I am going just as fast and as far as I can feel them behind me!"

And so, as we come here to-day and plant this column, consecrating it to its enduring dignity and honor as the

memorial of our unknown dead, we are doing, as I cannot but think, the fittest possible deed that we could do. These unknown that lie about us, here! Ah! what are they but the peerless representatives, elect forever by the deadly gage of battle, of those 60,000,000 of people, as to-day they are, whose rights and liberties they achieved! Unknown to us are their names,—unknown to them was the greatness and the glory of their deeds! And is not this, brothers of New York, the story of the world's best manhood, and of its best achievement? The work by the great unknown, for the great unknown—the work that, by fidelity in the ranks, courage in the trenches, obedience to the voice of command, patience at the picket-line, vigilance at the outpost, is done by that great host that bear no splendid insignia of rank, and figure in no commander's despatches, this work, with its largest and incalculable and unforeseen consequences, for a whole people,—is not this work, which we are here to-day to commemorate, at once the noblest and most vast? Who can tell us, now, the names, even, of those that sleep about us here, and who of them could guess on that eventful day when here they gave their lives for duty and their country, how great and how far-reaching would be the victory they should win?

And thus we learn, my brothers, where a nation's strength resides. When the German Emperor, after the

Franco-Prussian War, was crowned in the Salles des Glaces at Versailles, on the ceiling of the great hall in which that memorable ceremony took place, there were inscribed the words: "The King Rules by His Own Authority." "Not so," said that grand man of blood and iron who, most of all, had welded Germany into one mighty people—"not so; 'the Kings of the earth shall rule under me, saith the Lord.' Trusting in the tried love of the whole people, we leave the country's future in God's hands!" Ah, my countrymen, it was not this man or that man that saved our Republic in its hour of supreme peril. Let us not, indeed, forget her great leaders, great generals, great statesmen, and greatest among them all, her great martyr and President, Lincoln. But there was no one of these then who would not have told us that which we may all see so plainly now, that it was not they who saved the country, but the host of her great unknown. These, with their steadfast loyalty, these with their cheerful sacrifices, and these, most of all with their simple faith in God and in the triumph of His right—these they were who saved us! Let us never cease to honor them, and to trust them; and let us see to it that neither we nor they shall ever cease to trust in that overarching Providence that all along has led them. This field, you know, was not the field originally chosen by Meade and his lieutenants whereon to fight this

battle. The historian whom I have already quoted tells us that "while Meade was sending his advance to occupy Gettysburg, it was with no thought of fighting there. It seemed to him merely a point from which to observe and occupy the enemy's advance and mask his own movement to what seemed to him a better line in the rear." "But in spite of these prudent intentions . . . two formidable armies were approaching each other at their utmost speed, all through the 30th of June, driven by the irresistible laws of human action—or, let us reverently say, by the hand of Providence."¹ Yes, by the hand of Providence. "Trusting in the tried love of the whole people," said Bismarck, "we leave the country's future" in the people's hands? Nay, but "in God's hands!" "If I did not believe," said this great leader of his time, "in the divine government of the world, I would not serve my country another hour. Take my faith from me, and you take my country too!" Pregnant words, not alone for these times, but for all times. It was God in the people that made the heroism which, in these unknown ones, we are here to-day to honor. It must be forever, God in and with the people that shall make the nation great and wise and strong for any great emergency.

In that faith, men and brethren, we come here to rear

¹ Nicolay and Hay's *Life of Lincoln*, vol. vii., pp. 234, 236.

this monument and to lay the tribute of our love and gratitude upon these graves. May no alien nor vandal hand ever profane their grand repose who slumber here ! And when the sons of freedom, now unborn, through generations to come, shall gather here to sing again the praises of these unknown martyrs for the flag, may they kneel down beside these graves and swear anew allegiance to their God, their country, and the right !



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